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ABSTRACT

A five-week summer conference was arranged for high school English teachers in South Carolina to learn more about what happens as students learn to write, what teaching strategies would enhance their development, and how better writing courses might be designed and implemented. Participants, who wrote almost daily, were asked to examine their own writing processes: prewriting, writing, rewriting, and what it means to "find and develop an idea." They discussed those processes and teaching strategies to encourage students to work effectively. A variety of techniques were used to help teachers view the writing process as a whole rather than as fragmented and oversimplified. Teachers' attitudes began to change from seeing themselves as arbitors of usage to seeing themselves as resources to help students understand the varieties of language which can be used for different purposes. Many also became convinced that students must discover writing principles on their own. (TJ)

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A CONFERENCE FOR TEACHERS OF COMPOSITION

One of our most constructive responses to the literacy crisis has been the realization that we must begin working together to address the writing problems of our students. As "they"--parents, employers, legislators, administrators--continue to hold us under fire, "we" have assessed our position on the battlefield more carefully, examining the theoretical bases for our teaching, investigating the writing process more responsibly, and holding ourselves to higher standards of accountability. We seem to have abandoned our first defensive responses, our blame-shifting and fault-finding and complaining, in order to address the problem more constructively. We've found a new willingness for contributing to its solution. As never before, writing teachers at all educational levels are opening new lines of communication, sharing teaching strategies, cooperating to improve the quality of education we offer our students, and together, educating a concerned public about what we can and cannot do.

College teachers, for example, have finally begun to realize that we trained the elementary, middle, and secondary school English teachers we complain about so often. As a result, we have begun evalutating college-level courses required for certification to insure that the students in them become competent teachers of writing as well as informed students of literature. We have also become more sensitive to the needs of teachers in the field,

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those who want additional opportunities for graduate work and summer institutes to improve their credentials as writing teachers. We have shown a greater willingness to get out of our offices occasionally, to visit local schools and discuss writing with students and teachers. We are also showing up at more meetings of parent-teacher organizations, civic groups, and school administrators to support the teaching of writing and to turn the public outcry against compositional illiteracy in constructive directions. Why, even those once adversaries, the faculty in Departments of English and Education, are working together to sponsor joint conferences and workshops for teachers in public schools. To be sure, it's only a beginning, and admittedly we have made several missteps along the way, but I like what I see: a new willingness on the part of college faculty to find out what writing teachers need, to listen rather than to legislate, to clarify misinformation and to encourage cooperation.

The University of South Carolina's Conference for Teachers of Composition represents just one of many new efforts to bring together writing teachers from throughout a state to discuss the complexities of the writing process and to reinvigorate the teaching of writing at all educational levels. The need for it became apparent some two years ago, when a group of teaching assistants in the English Department began

assembling packets of information about composition courses in South Carolina colleges to share with secondary English teachers. We wanted to know more about the previous training our college freshmen had had as well as clear up misunderstandings high school teachers might have about what we were doing with their graduates. These packets were sent to some 250 high schools in South Carolina. After that, the teaching assistants, on their own time and at their own expense, began visiting some of these schools in order to support the constructive efforts high school teachers were making to improve the quality of instruction for their college-bound students. Long ignored and heavily criticized by institutions of higher education, the teachers' initial response to one of these visits was often one of suspicion and mistrust; they seemed at first to expect another scolding or, at best, a new set of do's and don't's. It didn't take long, though, for both of us to learn that we had mutual problems, frustrations, and successes, and that all of us were to some extent misunderstanding each other. We discovered, for example, that we knew very little about what was going on in high school English classes, what it means to teach writing to 150 students a day, how little flexibility there is in designing decent writing courses, how poorly-prepared most teachers think they are when forced to cope with the writing problems of poorly motivated students. The high school teachers, on the other hand, were surprised to

learn that many of their students who had not been in college-bound programs were indeed enrolling in college, that three spelling errors do not necessarily fail a freshman theme, and that college faculty are willing to admit that they have not adequately trained prospective writing teachers.

As a result of these initial conversations, we began planning the Conference so that all of us could learn more about what happens as students learn to write, what teaching strategies would enhance their development, and how we might design and implement better writing courses. The National Endowment for the Humanities awarded us a generous grant of $32,000 to support the effort. From June 3 to July 10, this past summer, then, eighty-seven teachers, most of them from South Carolina high schools, met for Conference classes in Columbia. A few of the 21 men and 66 women also represented elementary and middle schools as well as two- and four-year colleges. Some of the participants were working on degrees in Theatre and Speech and in the MAT program; most of them were pursuing master's and doctoral degrees in English or Education. All participants received three hours of graduate credit for completing the Conference. Since the NEH grant provided for faculty salaries, all tuition fees were waived. Conference participants werw also entitled to enroll for an additional three hours of

graduate credit if they wanted to complete a project during the year after the Conference had ended. 80% of the participants elected this option so that they could apply what they had learned in the Conference directly to their teaching. Although many of the projects are still in progress, the participants are busy redesigning writing courses all over the state, developing in-service training programs for teachers who were unable to come to the Conference, or conducting original research in the teaching of writing. The projects have encouraged these teachers to effect real, constructive changes in South Carolina schools and colleges and have enabled countless students, teachers, and administrators to benefit indirectly from the Conference.

According to information provided by the participants themselves, they came to the Conference for essentially three reasons: to improve their own composition classes, to learn more about an area of study they were already interested in, and to help upgrade their school's writing curriculum.

The faculty had not met these teachers prior to the beginning of classes, and although most of them had held short workshops for high school teachers before, they did not have extensive experience putting together a longer, five-week period of instruction for writing teachers. The four visiting faculty members--Rick Coe, University of

British Columbia; Dave Bartholomae, University of Pittsburgh; Joe Comprone, University of Louisville; and Susan Miller, Ohio State University--and I met several timed during the year prior to the Conference to plan it. We set aside time during meetings like this one to discuss our approach to the teaching of writing, our perspectives on student writing problems, and our views on what would be most helpful for writing teachers to know. The discussions enabled us to benefit from each other's special interests and teaching experiences. Our meetings also sent us back to the books and into the classroom to find new information and teaching strategies which our conversations prompted us to investigate. By the summer of 1977, then, the Conference faculty had discussed the teaching of writing often enough to share reasonably consistent theoretical and pedagogical approaches to the discipline, and we had also come to appreciate each other's special expertise in linguistics, rhetoric, psychology, reading and research.

The Conference staff also included six graduate students in English. They had all been active in the high school visitation program and as a result were able to help interpret the special needs of South Carolina teachers to the visiting faculty. The graduate students prepared themselves for their role in the Conference by meeting with me for discussinos similar to those I had had with the

faculty and by reading widely books and articles in the theory and teaching of composition. Once the Conference had begun, the graduate students attended all classes, helped conduct small group meetings of the participants to discuss material presented in class, and together with the faculty, held individual and group conferences about the projects participants were designing. Throughout the Conference, weekly meetings of the faculty and graduate assistants kept us on track, allowed us to discuss what was being taught in each section of the Conference, and helped resolve unforeseen problems.

Participants were grouped into four sections, depending on the time of day they found it most convenient to attend classes. All sections met daily for an hour and twenty minutes throughout the five-week period. Although the participants in various sections were not necessarily all reading the same assignments and discussing the same teaching problems on a given day, the broad outlines of the course were consistent. All participants were also using the same texts: Susan Miller's Writing: Process and Product and Ross Winterowd's The Contemporary Writer, and had access to materials on reserve in the English Department's Reading Room. Generally speaking, the sections covered similar material; yet each faculty member had leeway to conduct the class as he or she felt most comfortable and to turn the discussion toward the special interests of the students in each section. Now that we

have been through it all once, though, we hope to redesign the next conference a little differently. The participants seemed to want more time to discuss their teaching with participants in other sections. They also suggested that the faculty be rotated in some way so that all of the participants could benefit from the views of all of the faculty. And, we need to provide written objectives and course outlines for the participants prior to the beginning of Conference classes.

An important focus for the Conference was our belief that writing cannot be taught well if we pay attention only to the written product which a student surrenders to the teacher's red pen. We must adopt a broader humanistic understanding of what writing entails and often must develop additional teaching strategies to help students understand the complex choices writers make. The Conference began by asking participants to examine their own writing processes: What activities of mind and pen do pre-writing, writing, and re-writing involve? What does it mean to "find and develop an idea"? They learned, of course, that the process is quite complex and rarely linear, that it doubles back on itself and calls into play various mental and physical behaviors. Often the written product does not reflect all of what was going on in the writer's head before pen was put to paper, but it can provide clues if we know what to look for. Conference participants spent a great

deal of time discussing these processes, how they go awry for some students and what teaching strategies can encourage students to work them effectively. Theoretical concerns and current research were constantly probed for appropriate applications which the classroom teacher might use. Journals, formal and informal heuristics for invention, techniques for assessing the audience and purpose for a particular writing task sentence-combining exercises, writing workshops, ways of encouraging students to view their papers as "writings in progress," even something as simple as using outlines to determine how a paper can be revised once it is written--all of these techniques urged teachers to view the process as a whole, not fragmented and oversimplified as most writing texts would have it unfortunately.

During the Conference teachers began to change their perceptions of their work and to challenge commonly accepted notions about what they were teaching. As attitude surveys taken at the beginning and at the end of the Conference reveal, the participants adopted a much more student-centered perspective, attaching greater importance to developing their students' writing abilities than to simply judging written work. Most of them wanted to provide more opportunities to let their students write for audiences other than the teacher. They wanted to sequence writing assignments better and provide a more risk-free environment

in which students could practice writing for their own satisfaction. They also tended to see themselves less as arbitors of usage or purveyors of the mysteries of sentence-diagramming and more as resources to help students understand the varieties of language which could be used for different purposes, topics, and audiences. They became less concerned about making pronouncements (The rules of good writing can be isolated and codified; knowing grammar improves writing) and more convinced that students must discover writing principles on their own. They learned ways of letting students help each other, and, thanks to Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations, how to approach errors in student papers so that they can enhance progress rather than close doors to further development. The attitude surveys also reveal that the Conference shored up morale and gave the participants new confidence in their professional competence. Their responses to the items on the post-Conference attitude scale were less often in the neutral range; they were more cautious about responding emphatically to questions which could be read ambiguously, and they strongly agreed that the teaching of writing was as important and difficult, and required at least as much training, as the teaching of literature.

Participants also did a great deal of their own writing, both to understand what writing involves and to discover ways of applying what they learned to their teaching. Although writing assignments varied from section

to section, depending on the needs and interests of the class, participants were working on some kind of writing almost daily. They wrote for each other, for their students, and for their instructors. The first writing assignment in each section, for example, asked them to explain to their students why learning to write well was important. The second paper, addressed to their classmates, discussed the processes they had engaged in writing the first paper. Some participants kept elaborate teaching journals in which they analyzed the materials presented in class each day and described how the concepts could be applied to their own teaching. They also wrote short reports on outside readings, series of essays attempting to solve teaching problems they had encountered, statements of objectives, rationales for letter grades, analyses of the strengths and weaknesses in sample student papers, discussions of the projects they were designing to implement in their local schools, revisions or extensions of ideas in previously written papers, freewritings, sentence-combining exercises, and other practice writings which enabled them to experience directly some of the teaching techniques they hoped to use with their students this fall.

At the end of the Conference, the faculty reviewed each student's written work and selected a number of papers for publication in a collection of essays to appear in February, 1978. This 167-page paperback will be distributed throughout the state to other writing teachers,

principals, district English coordinators, legislators responsible for educational policies, leaders in civic groups concerned about public education, and administrators on whom we are depending to fund similar conferences in the future. Not only do the essays reflect the kind of hard work, professionalism, and enthusiasm which the Conference participants believe are necessary to teaching well, but they are also a way of sharing what we know about writing with those who support our work.

We are still benefitting from our five weeks together. Last November, 53 of the 87 participants came back to Columbia to review what they had been doing since the Conference ended last July. We set up a Swap Shop so that they could share materials they had developed. We discussed teaching techniques that had worked well, attempted to resolve new teaching problems, and discussed the effectiveness of their projects. Their enthusiasm and commitment to the teaching of writing had not been dampened by their return to the classroom; in fact, most of them have encouraged us to host another conference soon so that they and their colleagues can continue to grow as teachers. We have also been besieged with requests to visit South Carolina high schools for in-service meetings with teachers who have heard about the Conference but could not attend. Members of the freshman English staff are off campus almost once a week discussing the teaching of writing somewhere in the state. Teachers are also coming to Columbia more frequently, as they did last

semester and again earlier this month for Saturday conferences on writing sponsored jointly by education and linguistics faculty. Attendance at these meetings has been heavier than it has been in its three year history. The South Carolina Council of Teachers of English is also experiencing new growth, finding new leadership, and serving more teachers. A year ago, many had almost decided it should be allowed to die, but since then its membership has tripled. I am not suggesting, of course, that the Conference is responsible for all of that, but the Conference does represent, I think, an important, constructive response to the literacy crisis. We still face budget cutbacks, a sometimes hostile public, a legislature which is contemplating minimum competency testing of all high school students. We still have a great deal of work to do. But we have learned to do it together, to support each other, not only so that our students can profit from the best instruction we know how to give them, but also because our professional survival depends on it.